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ABSTRACT

National dropou figures hover around 46 percent, according to the U.S. Office of Education. School business partnerships, including occupational training, counseling, and preemployment experience, have been effective in reducing the dropout rate in many schools. The use of computers in teaching traditional subjects has proved attractive to students, especially if the software includes colorful graphics and sound effects. Another aspect of the dropout problem has been addressed by drug prevention programs in schools, and by pull-out programs for pregnant girls, who drop out at a rate of 80 to 90 percent nationally. Such a program in Seattle provided child care instruction, social services, counseling, and health education. Most of the programs described here have increased retention but have not made a great difference in the number of dropouts. Schools with lower dropout rates have been found to have stronger leadership, a more disciplined atmosphere, more dynamic instruction, and more student-teacher interaction. Opponents of diverse (alternative) curriculums argue that such programs deny access to the common culture to those who need it most--the disadvantaged. A bibliography of 15 items is included. (DM)

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ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AND DROPOUT RATE

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The inner city high school dropout rate has not varied significantly for two decades, and the numbers, rising with the population, have soared to unconscionable heights. Every year we lose almost a million students from our schools. Unprepared to find or hold jobs, dependent on others for subsistance, many move from discouragement to frustration to alienation. Some turn to crime. All risk failure as parents, as workers, and as citizens. And, society has to pay the consequences.

Educating the at-risk student is difficult, but vital. If the public schools cannot help students who are low achievers and fail to succeed, employers will pay more for a less productive workforce and society will pay more to sustain them.

What schools can do to retain today's student is a persistent problem, but a greater challenge for educators is how to provide educational experiences that focus on the student's potential and interests and that are positive enough to change the lives of these youths. From this perspective, the most important issue facing educators is that of developing a concept of schooling that will be attractive enough to hold these students, but effective enough to promote their learning and development.

The implementation of the recently recommended reforms may not bring excellence in education for all students. If academic standards are raised and students are not provided substantial additional help to attain them, it seems reasonable to expect that at-risk students will be more likely than ever to experience frustration and failure. The result for these students may not be notable increases in cognitive achievement, but rather notable increases in absenteeism, truancy, school-related behavior problems, and dropping out.

Thoughtful citizens concede the importance of national figures which focus attention upon the seriousness of the dropout problem. This study will point out the need for and encourage intensive exploration and research in the area of dropout prevention which would help to determine what measures a school might take to increase its holding power.

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The 1947 issue of Parents Magazine reported that the majority of dropouts were sixteen years of age and dropped out from the ninth and tenth grades. Figures compiled by the U.S. Office of Education showed that, of every 1,000 students who entered the fifth grade in 1933-1934, only 462 remained to graduate in 1941. At the tenth year of high school, only 688 remained. In the 1960's the Sputnik Era produced a national concern for education, specifically, education with a mathematics and science emphasis. Increased standards and quality were key so the United States could compete in the highly complex world of international affairs. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the passage of PL 94-142 in 1975 are examples of a shift from a purely "quality" orientation in the education of our youth to one of "equality" for all (Timberlake, 1983).

Net results of these and other efforts showed no significant changes in the dropout-prone student as exhibited on such standardized tests as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)or American College Test (ACT). Thus, the 1970's saw a theme of "back to basics" and competency testing, a theme which continues today. Still, high percentages of dropouts remain with us. The U.S. Office of Education reports that national dropout figures hover around 42 percent (Dillon, 1987).

The purpose of this section is to provide a synopsis of the studies undertaken by researchers disturbed by this lingering dilemma who have gathered data indicating how schools can hold on to their students. In researching this problem, this writer found proposed solutions both simple and complex. Following is a sample of those findings.

A study prepared by the Massachusetts Advocacy Center and the Center for Early Adolescence at the University of North Carolina reports that efforts to keep children from dropping out of school included school-based reforms that enhanced achievement, promoted self-esteem, and provided personalized, rather than punitive discipline. The alternative strategy included academic and social support for vulnerable students, along with an assessment of school policies and practices that undermined the school's holding power for all its students. In addition, a "school improvement and dropout planning committee" composed of teachers, administrators parents, students, and others was established. The pilot program supported at-risk students, initiated ongoing teacher training, and reviewed policies and practices. At the end of the first year, the dropout percentage decreased by 7 percent (Levin, 1987).

Minority students dropout at a rate at least double that of white students. In 1979, the Silicon Valley of California formed a coalition/partnership with the Sequoia Union High School District and designed a program to meet three objectives: (1) reduce the high dropout rate of minorities, (2) reduce youth and minority unemployment, and (3) reduce the number of unskilled jobs in the area. Called the Peninsula Academies, this partnership "schools within schools" has seen positive results. Students have achieved significantly better grade point averages, pass rates, and attendance records than a control group of comparable students taught in a traditional setting. During the summer, 83 percent of the students were placed in summer jobs, and more than 86 percent of them completed their schoolwork with good to outstanding ratings from their superiors (Benedict, et al., 1987).

The American business community knows that no quick fix to the dropout problem exists. Some corporate leaders are joining educators in a search for answers. About five years ago, high risk students were dropping out in Oxford, Massachusetts. Digital Equipment Corporation helped develop a partnership called the Cooperative Federation for Education Experiences. The core of this partnership is an occupational training component. It combines academic instruction on a traditional high school campus with training for entry-level positions in high technology fields. The program blends five components: academic study, occupational training, counseling, preemployment experiences, and physical education. After three years, 23 of 134 Oxford at-risk students remained in school to complete their educations; 57 remained the program; 19 had either left for full-time jobs or joined the armed forces. All others were moved back into the traditional programs (Merenda, 1989).

In an alternative vs. traditional study conducted in Arkansas at the tenth grade level over two years, Moskowitz (1989) reported that educators had been proactive in their efforts to deal with potentially troubled children. Schools developed programs and resource materials that not only provided intervention but were also preventive in nature. Some brought in special personnel to head up programs or created new positions to deal with the ever-increasing problems that vie for counselors' time. Other schools have retrained existing personnel and set up teams within the schools. School attendance was reported as up from previous years.

Quality educational computer programs help to create an effective learning environment for chronic truants. Since at-risk students appear accustomed to experiencing academic failure, software for these students helped guarantee success in a Bronx, New York high school. The Bronx Regional High School works with students who have serious reading and writing problems. The high school offers a different kind of alternative educational program for students 15 to 20 years old. The students enjoy programs with frequent interaction with the computer. They are especially attracted to programs with sound effects and colorful graphics as well as those that are student-directed. Teachers of chronic truants prefer programs with recordkeeping systems so they can track student successes and failures, and then provide more individualized instruction. Though attendance rates over the past two years are rising, there are no data indicating a decline in the dropout rate (Moffet, 1988).

Alcohol and substance abuse, another at-risk problem is pervasive in inner city high schools. In Southern Connecticut, a Regional Youth Substance Abuse Project serves six school systems offering a kindergarten through twelfth grade prevention program. School teams are headed by an administrator who is already employed by the school and is trained in alcohol and substance abuse. John Higgins-Biddle, director of RYSAP, is working to limit the responsibility of the school to handle drug and alcohol abuse through a system of early identification and intervention that would refer the student to treatment. This prevention program is incorporated into the regular curriculum. Drug and alcohol information is introduced in science and language arts. The schools have developed their own curriculum that draws from abuse prevention research. Dramatic increases in referrals, particularly from the students themselves or their peers, are the most valuable evidence that the programs are working (Edmonds, 1989).

A pull-out program for pregnant girls administered by the city of Seattle, Washington provided Social Services, counseling, health, career guidance, child care instruction, and education. Classes met a half-day for academic education. The program had a 70 percent retention rate (Pollock, 1987).

McFee and Geesay (1986) reported a dropout rate of 9.5 percent in 1983-84 compared to a national rate of 80 to 90 percent for pregnant teens. In their program, classes were held in school twice a week, two hours each session during the regular school day. The students were responsible for the work missed in regular classes. In this inner city high school, coordination with local

physicians and nearby hospitals was an important factor. The program had three goals:

1. To retain pregnant students in school;

2. To form a support group and to supply information about prenatal care;

3. To encourage girls to build self-esteem.

Another program geared to reducing the dropout rate is a Camden, New Jersey high school project characterized by high expectations, deadlines by which students will be performing at or near grade level, stimulating instructional programs, lots of planning by the educational staff, and the utilization of all available parental and community resources. The results of a survey designed to obtain growth were positive. Impact on the dropout rate was minimal (Puffert, 1986).

In Rancho Santiago Community High School District a program called "Star" was integrated into the curriculum. Located in Orange County, "Star" focused on a reading laboratory. The lab was open from 7:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., and the student at-risk academically attended about six hours a week. These potential dropouts learned more about the use of language as a communication tool than about language itself. Students worked from a study plan that had been individualized for their reading levels. Periodically, they adjusted the level of difficulty to one they felt most beneficial to them. The workshops provided directed group activity in subjects such as study skills, comprehension, enrichment, etc. In addition to the lab providing a setting where students could feel good about themselves and their achievements, two years of attendance produced higher attendance levels and a slight decrease in the dropout rate. The target population for the lab was ninth and tenth grade (Alexander, 1985).

An ethnographic study was designed by the Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance during which a researcher spent an extended period of time in participant observation in matched pairs of schools. The study included formal questionnaires administered to a sample of students, teachers and administrators, structured classroom observations, and informal observation in the schools. The data were supplemented when possible by statistical data provided by the Chicago Board of Education and the schools. The study found six major characteristics that distinguish the lower dropout rate schools from the higher dropout rate

schools in each pair. These included:

(1) stronger leadership from the principal and his or her administration,

(2) more order and discipline in the halls, lunchrooms and other common areas of the school,

(3) better student attendance,

(4) lower failure rates,

(5) more active instruction and less seatwork in the classroom, and

(6) more interaction between teachers and students in class.

In addition to these factors which distinguished schools with lower dropout rates, the study also found factors in all schools which might contribute to a high student dropout rate. For example, most students received less than the 300 instructional minutes a day in class time mandated by state law. A culture of cutting prevailed among students, and in some schools student attendance was poorly monitored by administrators. Individual attention to each student averaged only a few minutes a day, and teachers complained of "burnout". As a result of this study, the panel put forth steps it believed could be taken to reduce the dropout rate. The strategies suggested support alternative school settings (Hess, 1986).

The other side of the alternative vs. traditional school setting argues, however, that a common (traditional) curriculum immerses students in those bodies of knowledge that are essential for their own success as well as for the survival of the culture. Whatever differences of ability and interest exist among students, they should all be equipped with that knowledge that has proven to be liberating and enlightening to the human race. To do otherwise is to handicap some youth with inferior and limiting knowledge. In short, a diverse (alternative) curriculum is ultimately discriminatory against those who most need the common (traditional) curriculum - the poor and disadvantaged (Wehlage, 1986).

It is evident from this study that most of the literature relative to dropout prevention deals with "we believe" from researchers unable to produce hard data. Rutter (1986) recommends that schools find and researchers document curricular experiences that can both retain student interest and engagement on the one hand, and result in worthwhile learning and development on the other. Mere suggestions and educated guesses in the area of research without data to back them up are useless.

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